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RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC
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REF: A) ADDIS 3611 B) ADDIS 0027
SUBJECT: USG HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TEAM: SECURITY AND ACCESS
UPDATE #3

Summary

1. Between January 2 and 9, U.S. Government (USG) Humanitarian Assistance Team (HAT) in Ethiopia staff, traveled to Degehabur and Fik zones in Somali Region as part of a second field visit to assess current humanitarian conditions. USG HAT staff report that a letter of approval from the Somali Regional President significantly improved and facilitated USG HAT travel in the region. However, some areas remained inaccessible due to security concerns, including Dihun, Segeg, and Gerbo districts of eastern Fik Zone. USG HAT staff identified a critical lack of U.N. Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) presence and capacity in Somali Region that is significantly undermining security monitoring, reporting, and information sharing. Both U.N. agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating within the conflict-affected areas of Somali Region characterized current UNDSS presence and performance as inadequate. UNDSS representatives also acknowledge the need to augment staffing to effectively support the humanitarian community in Somali Region. In addition, the absence of a U.N. Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) operation in Somali Region is negatively affecting programming and contingency response capacity. End summary.

Access and Security

¶2. Between January 2 and 9, USG HAT staff, traveled to Degehabur and Fik zones in Somali Region as part of a second humanitarian field assessment. In a January 2 meeting, the Somali Regional President provided written authorization for USG HAT travel in Somali Region, including the five conflict-affected zones of Fik, Degehabur, Warder, Gode, and Korahe. USG HAT staff report that the authorization letter significantly improved and facilitated USG HAT travel in the region, Qding reduced delays at military checkpoints and increased cooperation from military and civil authorities. However, some areas remained inaccessible due to security concerns, including Dihun, Segeg, and Gerbo districts of eastern Fik Zone. Medecines Sans Frontieres (MSF)/Switzerland reported that areas south of Hamedo town and Kasanagas village, Hamedo District, were unsafe due to Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) presence and an increased risk of clashes with the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF). In addition, the Degehabur Zonal Commissioner denied approval for USG HAT travel to Degehamedo District, Degehabur Zone, due to security concerns and military escort requirements.

¶3. USG HAT staff received reports of recent fighting and observed the presence of landmines in some areas of Degehabur and Fik zones. In Bulale village, Degehabur District, 42 kilometers (km) southeast of Degehabur town, local residents reported recent fighting between the ONLF and ENDF approximately 10 km from Bulale. Approximately one km outside of Bulale, USG HAT staff observed a well marked landmine. In addition, USG HAT observed two, well marked landmines during travel between Hamero town and Kasangas village, Hamero District, Fik Zone. USG HAT staff report that as a result of the clear demarcation and local driver knowledge of landmine placement

outside of Bulale and Kasangas villages, the landmines did not pose a risk to USG HAT travel in the area.

¶4. USG HAT staff emphasize the need to respect local ENDF checkpoint procedures in the region. During USG HAT travel to Fik town, the lead car in the three-car convoy inadvertently failed to stop at an ENDF checkpoint approximately 1 km outside of Fik town, prompting a tense exchange between ENDF soldiers and USG HAT staff. The second car in the convoy stopped at the checkpoint and radioed the first car to return. Following a brief discussion and cursory check of the vehicle, the ENDF soldiers permitted the convoy to continue. However, the incident underscores the importance of adhering to checkpoint procedures, which the USG HAT safety and security officer emphasized with all convoy drivers and USG HAT members.

UNDSS: Under-staffed and Under-resourced

¶5. USG HAT staff note a critical lack of UNDSS presence and capacity in Somali Region, which is prohibiting the provision of adequate security support to humanitarian staff and operations in the region. Both U.N. agencies and NGOs operating within the conflict-affected areas of Somali Region characterize current UNDSS presence and performance as inadequate. MSF/Switzerland and SC/UK staff in Fik Zone report frustration regarding the lack of UNDSS security reporting and information sharing. The U.N. World Food Program (WFP) reported that UNDSS's current weakness is undermining its own efforts to expand access and presence in the region, due to WFP's reliance on UNDSS for information and security clearance. USG HAT staff note that the absence of a robust and reliable security presence in Somali Region has significant negative implications, including undermining humanitarian staff safety and operations.

¶6. In a January 11 meeting with USG HAT staff, UNDSS and WFP security representatives also acknowledged the need to augment staffing to meet minimum safety and security standards and effectively support the humanitarian community in Somali Region. Current staffing levels, with three international and four local staff covering the entire country, are inadequate to address security monitoring and reporting needs for the region. Both UNDSS and WFP security representatives identified the need for

international staff from their organizations to be based in Jijiga town, Jijiga Zone, and Kebridahar town, Korahe Zone. Currently, neither WFP nor UNDSS maintains a permanent international staff presence in Somali region. UNDSS and WFP report that efforts to augment staffing levels have been hindered by budget limitations to date.

¶7. In addition, USG HAT staff report that the absence of an UNHAS operation in Somali Region is negatively affecting programming and contingency response capacity, including emergency evacuation planning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

¶8. USG HAT staff will continue to closely coordinate with the U.S. Embassy resident security officer, UNDSS, WFP, and NGOs to share security information and inform future USG HAT travel in Somali region. In addition, USG HAT staff recommend U.S. Government and USAID Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/DCHA) advocacy with the U.N. to augment UNDSS presence and capacity in Somali Region. High-level advocacy to facilitate UNHAS operations in the region is also recommended.

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